

I can't exactly remember when I first heard Howard Tate. Somewhere back in a now-hazy teenaged memory I recall riding around North Jersey suburbs listening to the AM soul station out of Newark and hearing "Ain't Nobody Home" and "Look At Granny Run Run" and knowing they were like nothing else, bluesier, than what was coming out of Memphis but every bit as soulful.

Sometime later I bought the album, *Get It While You Can*, which quickly became one of the most treasured parts of my collection. The cover was reason enough to buy it. An old style R&B cover, purple and blue with a big black and white photo of Tate tinted in blue. Skinny, smiling, he had one of the wildest pompadours on any singer before or since.

It was his voice that grabbed you, straight from the church. B.B. King and Sam Cooke rolled into one, but more energized, with perfect phrasing, and emotion to spare capped by an amazing falsetto he called on at just the right moments. And while it was soul music, there was a strong blues current behind it that wrapped it up and took it home, leaving no doubt that this was the real deal.

*I started singing around the age of I guess six or seven in my father's church. He was a minister and I used to sing around the house and he'd hear me trying to sing, and I loved the gospel groups of that day, The Nightingales, the Dixie Hummingbirds, Sam Cooke and the Soul Stirrers. So he said to me one day, "Why don't you learn a song and sing before I bring the sermon? Why don't you sing a song? So I started learning the gospels and I started singing before he would bring the sermons and that's how it all started.*

Janis Joplin would later record the title track, one of the great heartbreaking soul ballads of all time on what turned out to be her final album, *Pearl*, and it would be a huge hit.

*When Janis Joplin did it, it just put icin' on the cake! A major superstar like that to do my record, my music. I was so honored to have her do it. When we made that record in the studio, we knew that song was... we was makin' a serious statement with that song because it showed the versatility of Howard Tate. A lot of artists, they can sing one style, but I'm blessed with a gift, I can sing any style. I can sing the blues, I can come back and sing a "Get It While You Can," I can come back and sing a funk song in the order of Wilson Pickett or James Brown, I can do it all. That shows Ragovoy was tryin' to show my versatility there and he did a great job of it.*

The more I listened the more I became convinced Tate was one of the greatest soul and blues singers I'd ever heard, right up there with Otis

Redding, Wilson Pickett, Bobby Bland, Ray Charles and Solomon Burke. The man had presence and power to spare.

Some time later in the '70s, I found another Tate album, this time on Atlantic, simply titled *Howard Tate*. The wild pompadour had been replaced by an afro. Like the first album, it was produced by Jerry Ragovoy, who wrote most of the songs and arrangements. There were three songs I immediately recognized, "Where Did My Baby Go" which I had on a single by the Butterfield Blues Band, and curiously enough, The Band's "Jemima Surrender," and Dylan's "Girl From The North Country" arranged as a soul song. Tate let loose wildly stretching out lines till they were about to break, seeming almost out of control, then snapping back just in time.

This time the musicians were listed who turned out to be some of the finest session men in New York, names like Richard Tee, Eric Gale, Bernard "Pretty Purdie," Jerry Jermott, David Spinozza, and Rick Marotta to name a few. The sound in general is a bit cleaner than the Verve album, but Tate's vocals and Ragovoy's arrangements had the same intensity.

Around this time, I began to wonder who is this guy and *where* is he. I knew he was from Philly and when he had his first few hits, he was dubbed "The Soul Mayor of Philadelphia," since the mayor at that time was James H. Tate. Every year I'd look in the Philly phone book, but Howard or even H. Tate was never listed. Some people I knew went up to North Philly and talked to members of the Dixie Hummingbirds. No one knew.

Some time later, while browsing cut-out bins in a record store, I found a third Tate album (which was actually his second), *Howard Tate Reaction*, on Lloyd Price Turntable Records, and produced by Price and Johnny Nash and according to the info on the cover, recorded in Jamaica. The arrangements had none of the precision of Ragovoy's, and in addition to a reggae "Hold Me Tight," there were a lot of covers of old soul songs with a slowed-down version of Sam Cooke's "Chain Gang" being the standout.

Decades passed, and every once in a while I'd have fun playing Tate for friends into R&B who didn't know about him. In 1993, Rhino wisely put "Girl From The North Country" on a compilation called *Black On White* (subtitled "Great R&B Covers of Rock Classics"), and in 1995 Mercury reissued the original Verve album on CD with an additional seven bonus tracks. But it seemed like that was the legacy of Howard Tate. What happened to someone who was easily one of the greatest soul singers of all time remained a mystery.

*Last I heard about him he was in New York, and Jerry Ragovoy used to produce him. He made all these demos with the guy and I asked Ragovoy, "Where in the world is Howard Tate? and he wouldn't tell me. So he's*

*either in jail or dead or just not working in music which seems unlikely because the guy's so great. There's never been any better than Howard Tate. Fantastic.*

*—Ry Cooder, 1981 (from an interview conducted by the writer).*

Last Easter Sunday, I was eating breakfast and reading the Sunday *Philadelphia Inquirer*. I turned to the second section and was stunned to see an article on Howard Tate. He was alive and a minister in South Jersey.

A disc jockey, Phil Casden who had a weekly show on WNJC in Washington, NJ would regularly ask listeners for information on Howard Tate. On New Year's Day, Ron Kennedy, a former singer in Harold Melvin and The Blue Notes spotted Tate in a supermarket and told him to call Casden. Tate was soon reunited with producer Jerry Ragovoy and appeared in New Orleans during the Jazz & Heritage Festival.

On July 21<sup>st</sup>, Tate played his first New York date in three decades at the Village Underground. I made sure I was there. I'd spent the past month trying to convince people to go see this singer they'd never heard of, and I wondered myself if he could still do it. When Tate walked on stage and the Uptown Horns blasted into "Stop" (a song later covered by Al Kooper and Mike Bloomfield), there was no doubt. It was as if he had recorded the song the day before instead of in 1967. The pleading intensity in his voice and the falsetto were intact, and the arrangement seemed exactly the same. And there was nothing in the show to suggest an oldies show, some old singer revisiting his past. It was the real deal and real R&B show, the way they used to be. It was if somehow, except for looking older, he had been suspended in time and appeared to deliver the goods. Jerry Ragovoy was in the audience, and Tate was more than happy to acknowledge him.

Tate played what seemed like the entire *Get It While You Can* album, a couple of songs from the Atlantic album and as if to prove he was here to stay, did two new songs. One, "Sorry, Wrong Number" had classic written all over it.

*One of the sweetest voices in soul music, combined with one of the most savvy*

*soul producers - Howard Tate & Jerry Ragavoy - and God has seen fit to reincarnate them! Is this a beautiful country or what?*

*—Al Kooper*

A few weeks after the show I found myself sitting in Howard Tate's living room, in a New Jersey suburb northeast of downtown Philly. The furnishing was sparse. A guitar case was on the floor and there were piles

of CDs on the coffee table, on the floor, on another table. A computer was in one corner with a scrolling "Jesus Saves" screensaver.

Howard Tate:

**PSB: How did you end up in Philly?**

Well we migrated from the South when I was just about 4 years old, my parents migrated here because of trying to do better economically 'cause farming was a way of life in the deep south in those days and the opportunity for employment and economic growth was greater in the North and so they migrated and North and that's how we migrated to Philadelphia.